What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?

An Exercise in Biblical Hermeneutics

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Why are there so many different denominations in Christianity? One of the central causes for the different types of Christianity is their various interpretations of the Bible. For all churches, the Bible is the true source of knowledge and understanding about God. Building on the Hebrew tradition, the New Testament focuses the Christian's conception of God through the lens of Jesus Christ. Even here, however, the issue of biblical interpretation enters the equation.

For the Church to provide meaningful guidance for the Christian community in contemporary society, the biblical text must speak to their concerns. To do this task successfully, a credible biblical hermeneutic (or principles of interpretation) must be established. A viable and valid interpretation must be derived from the biblical text itself rather than brought in as part of an outside agenda lest we look only to use the Bible as proof for an already established position. To establish an unbiased analysis of the biblical text is, of course, virtually impossible. But in approaching issues of concern to the Church, the biblical text must be examined within the context of the time in which it was written and not merely evaluated according to what the contemporary influence of society says about the scriptural texts.

In this essay, I wish to show the importance of a careful biblical hermeneutic in speaking to a hot button topic in today's society, homosexuality. The debate about homosexuality runs throughout contemporary society from military admittance policy to depictions of sexuality in popular culture by the media. The Christian community is not impervious to this debate about homosexuality as it rages throughout America. I seek to set aside my beliefs and presuppositions in my analysis of the biblical text so that I do not impress my feelings about homosexuality on my conclusions about this issue. The greatest control in my research has been my overwhelming desire to have clarity on what the Bible actually says about this extremely controversial issue without having its presentation tempered by the agenda of the mass media by which it is often presented.

To do this, I will first establish a biblical hermeneutic that is rooted in the biblical text. I will then use this hermeneutic to interpret the principle biblical texts that address homosexuality and homosexual relations. Finally, I will use the conclusions that are obtained from this analysis to set out guidelines that can direct Christian attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals in the present day.

I. Biblical Hermeneutic

I must first establish the context in which the texts were written. The Bible rarely references the issue of homosexuality. In fact, there are only six biblical passages, three in the Old or Hebrew Testament and three in the New or Christian Testament, that address this issue in any type of direct form.[1] This is a low frame of reference for an issue that has become so controversial today. Jesus himself as presented in the Gospels, never addressed this issue.[2] I will give more clarity as to the context of each individual biblical passage addressing same-sex relations in my analysis of each.

Additionally, the present day conception of homosexuality as a sexual orientation did not exist in the time that the biblical text was written.[3] People of this time had no inclination that some people were naturally attracted towards the same sex and were not heterosexual like the majority of the population.[4] The concept of homosexuality as a natural feeling of attraction to members of the same sex was not articulated until later in history. Consequently, when I use the word homosexuality to refer to same-sex relations in the Bible, I do not refer to our contemporary conception of homosexuality as a sexual orientation.

The relevant passages in the Bible discussing homosexuality are all cloaked in other issues that the text is addressing simultaneously. These other issues range from homoerotic rape (Genesis) to the Holiness Code (Leviticus) to homoerotic prostitution, pederasty, and idolatry in the Pauline letters.[5] These other issues must be taken into account when evaluating the text so that we do not complicate this debate further by adding new dimensions to the author's words through incorrect interpretation.

When we interpret the Bible, we must remember that the language used is conditioned by time, place, and circumstance.[6] Every understanding of the Bible is based on interpretation in light of its own contextual framework and this should be a fundamental aspect to biblical scholarship. The challenge lies in developing an understanding of the primary context of the text. In the application of this biblical hermeneutic, we want to be able to determine whether and why verses are important to our lives in contemporary society or whether they are solely applicable to their immediate audience. We must establish to what extent is the textual message time and culture bound and to what extent must the Church consider it timeless.

This hermeneutic is absolutely essential, as it keeps us away from the practice of proof texting to prove what we believe the text should say. Merely pulling out specific passages that argue for or against homosexuality is where the debate begins and ends for most, as they believe they are right because of what they think the text is saying. They often miss the point because they look at the Scriptures as normative in some situations but not in all. This is why a biblical hermeneutic must be established to look at Scripture through a broader lens than one's own personal experiences, desires, and objectives. We want to know what the biblical text meant to its audience (as near as possible!) before we propose to say what it means for us today.

The biblical hermeneutic that we use to interpret the Scriptures must not be brought upon the text from outside but instead it must emerge from within the text. It will come out in the form of affirmations about the characteristics of God and our relation to God and the people of God that can be seen throughout the Hebrew and Christian Testament. After we have established this hermeneutic, we can then use it to interpret the Scriptures concerning homosexuality.

Throughout the Bible, the overriding characteristic of God that we can readily see is love for all people. This overriding principle can be seen from the trials of the Israelite nation in the Hebrew Testament to the ministry of Jesus in the Christian Testament. It is impossible to look at any biblical text without first recognizing that above all God loves his people and demands of them only that they

love him with their whole heart and their neighbors in return.[7] When this simple hermeneutical principle is used in our evaluation of homosexuality, it will lead us to an understanding of the text in the context it was written. We will know what to consider as normative and what to consider as specific to the current time period and not applicable to contemporary society.

II. Biblical Texts

Genesis 19:4–9

> *Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom – both young and old – surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." "Get out of our way," they replied. And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door (NIV).*

The first set of verses in the Bible that seem to address the topic of homosexuality is found in the story of Sodom. In this story, two angels of God disguised as male travelers come to the city of Sodom where Lot offers them hospitality. After they finish their meal, the men of Sodom come demanding "to know"[8] the guests. Lot refuses their demand and instead offers his two virgin daughters as a substitute. This does not appease the crowd as they only become more unruly. Before the crowd hurts Lot or his family and guests, the angels strike them blind and then rescue Lot and his family before the city is destroyed by fire and brimstone.

For many years, the condemnation of Sodom has been equated with homosexual gang rape.[9] The attempted violent sexual assault of the travelers has been seen as a clear sign of Sodom's sins but in fact, while violent sexual assault is condemned,[10] the major sin in this story is inhospitality, not homosexuality.[11] The men of Sodom want "to know" (read rape) the guests of Lot's house not because of homosexual attraction or orientation but rather to show their dominance.[12] By disregarding the social rules of hospitality, the men of Sodom sought to demean the guests merely because they were visitors to Sodom.

Inhospitality can be confirmed as the great sin of Sodom through further biblical references to Sodom. In no other place in the Bible is Sodom connected with homosexual practices.[13] In Ezekiel, the sins of Sodom are named as pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease without aid to the poor and needy.[14] Amos also points to the judgment of Sodom's inhospitality and injustice by warning Israel that they will face the same punishment if they continue to take advantage of and not care for the poor and needy.[15] Additionally in the New Testament, Jesus makes reference to Sodom in the context of cities that will be destroyed because they have not shown welcome to those who carry the Gospel, as

Sodom was inhospitable to the angels of God.[16] Jesus again makes reference to Sodom in the book of Luke when speaking about inhospitality.[17]

In any case, the city of Sodom has already been put under sentence before the angels even arrive. The angelic visitors are at the request of Abraham as he pled with God for the cities to be saved if even fifty or ten righteous men could be found to reside there.[18] This fact in addition to the others invalidates the claim that Sodom was damned because of homosexuality.

Homosexuality is far from the focus of this text. It is not the primary reason for the destruction of the city because the sin of inhospitality among others was much farther reaching. The men of Sodom did not want to have homosexual relations with the guests of Lot because they were interested in them sexually but rather because they want to substantiate their power over them. This is why their major sin is inhospitality not homosexuality. When we apply our biblical hermeneutic to this story, it becomes apparent that inhospitality does not fit with the principle of love. The men of Sodom did not want to love these visitors but on the contrary wanted to demean and dominate them. The reason that Lot and his family were spared from destruction along with the rest of the city is that they were following the biblical hermeneutic by taking in the travelers and making sure that they were provided for. They seem to understand that all are equal under the eyes of God and therefore all should be cared for as equals here on Earth.

Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

> *Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable (NIV).*
>
> *If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads (NIV).*

The second set of Hebrew Scriptures that address the subject of homosexuality most explicitly are found in Leviticus as part of the Holiness Code. This code was a set of guidelines that directed the Israelite people in terms of what was considered clean and unclean. There were two types of law in the Holiness Code, moral and ritual, and homosexual practices fall under the heading of ritual purity, as they were to keep God's community distinct from those of the pagan culture that surrounded it.[19]

When looking at these two verses closely, there are many similarities. Both use the exact same language to describe same-sex relations and both belong to long lists of sexual transgressions.[20] Many biblical analysts believe that the writers of the Holiness Code connected homosexual behavior with cultic practices because this was the norm in the pagan cultures that surrounded the nation of Israel.[21] The reason that homosexuality was a looming issue for the Israelite community is because it was a practice of others, a practice deemed as unclean for the Israelites who were to keep a separation between God's community and those communities where idolatrous practices were the norm.

The section of Leviticus, 17–26, better known as the Holiness Code, contains many prohibitions for the Israelite community that are ignored today. These acts that are deemed unclean include eating

rare meat to harvesting all the grain or grapes within a field or vineyard, wearing clothes made of two different materials, and shaving. In short, some of the laws of the Holiness Code have been saved because of their association with other moral implications while others have gone by the wayside because they are seen as merely part of a purity ethic that was pertinent only to the Hebrew community of the time.[22] The Holiness Code was developed to eliminate the ambiguities of what was clean and unclean in Hebrew society. Many scholars argue that these purity laws do not have implications for Christians today as the New Testament makes it clear that the purity requirements of the Hebrew Bible do not apply to Gentiles.[23] It seems very clear that Jesus in his ministry throws out the purity system as a necessary criterion for becoming a Christian.[24]

When looking at these verses in terms of our biblical hermeneutic, it is difficult to accept their direct application to contemporary society. When the Holiness Code was developed in ancient Israelite culture, the adherence to it was the way that the Hebrew people could show their love for God. When the people of Israel were obedient to this set of guidelines that was drawn out for them, God knew that their focus was on him. This same relationship is not present today. In his teachings, Jesus rebuked the Holiness Code as a way of measuring our relationship with God and by doing this; he eliminated the regulations from the Holiness Code that would bind our life. In the New Testament, it is clear that among Christians there is a rejection of the linkage between physical purity and access to God.[25] Physical purity became optional although still related to Israelite identity but not essential for salvation or church membership as this dismissal can be seen throughout the Gospels.[26] Paul also reinforces this notion, as he did not see adherence to purity laws as essential for the Christian faith.[27]

The aspects of the Holiness Code that Jesus found to be pertinent he repeated in his teachings as to reinforce their importance. But when addressing these verses on homosexuality, Jesus did not affirm their relevance for the contemporary Christian community, which leads to the conclusion that these regulations were specific to the ancient Israelite community.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 & 1 Timothy 1:9–10

> *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (malakoi) nor homosexual offenders (arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (NIV).*

> *We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts (arsenokoitai), for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine (NIV).*

The reason that I am addressing these two passages together is because their format and language are alike. Both of these verses are listings of immoral behaviors characteristic of the society of two early churches of the ancient world and both of these lists are nearly identical.[28] The difficulty in the interpretation of these verses is determining what the author actually means by the terms *arsenokoitai*,

which appears in both verses, and *malakoi*, which is present only in the 1 Corinthians verse. There has been great controversy over the interpretation of these words because the first time that they appear in any literature is these Greek biblical texts from which we have to extrapolate their meaning. This is problematic because there is no frame of reference in which to determine what exactly Paul meant in his writing.

First Corinthians 6:9 is the initial verse I will address. In this verse, we find the term *malakoi*, which is found in two other places in the biblical text. In both Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25, the term literally means soft.[29] In a moral context, soft refers to moral weakness without specific connection to sexual undertones.[30] Because of its usage in two other passages of the biblical text, this is the less ambiguous of the two terms.

The meaning of the term *arsenokoitai* is difficult to ascertain because of the lack of context for its meaning. Countryman points out that etymology can be used in determining the meaning of the word but in fact it is not the etymological meaning that is important in understanding what Paul was trying to say but rather the usage of the word for Paul and his audience.[31] The word combines two other words, "male" and "lying with or sleeping with".[32] Interestingly enough, there were many terms that were used to describe those who partook in homosexual relations, *paiderastes, pallakos, kinaidos, arrenomanes,* and *paidophthoros* but Paul did not choose to use any of these terms in this context.[33] Because Paul did not use any of these other words to describe the behavior that is condemned in the list of sins, the meaning of *arsenokoitai* comes into serious question about its connection to homosexuality. It may be that this term refers either to male prostitution or pederasty; both of these interpretations would fit into the context of the time in which Paul was writing.[34] Either interpretation would fit because in both situations one partner is taking a passive role and the other the dominant role. For Paul this violation of the normal male-female roles in sexual relations was because this homosexual act was driven by lust and not fueled by love.[35]

Concurrent in the understanding of First Corinthians 6:9 is the comprehension of First Timothy 1:10. The same language *arsenokoitai* is used as in the verse in First Corinthians. The interpretation of this word as meaning male prostitution or pederasty fits into the context of the First Timothy letter as well as it is mentioned in a list of sins. In this verse as in the passage from First Corinthians, the author does not appear to specify homosexual activity as a focus but rather mentions this immorality along with other vices in an illustration of his point.[36]

When looking at these two verses, it is difficult to establish a concrete interpretation of what the author is trying to say. It is obvious that the language used in First Timothy is connected to Paul's meaning in First Corinthians. Whether or not Paul himself penned First Timothy, it is likely that this late Pauline letter merely reflected Paul's earlier language. The difficulty in both of these letters is the interpretation of the terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. Because there is not a good frame of reference, which we can use to establish a context for these words, the door is open for biblical scholars to interpret these two verses to fall in line with what they see present in the other verses that address homosexuality. To be sure, one cannot base an evaluation of the biblical ethic on homosexuality on

these two verses alone because their intended meaning is just too unclear.

When we look at these passages through the lens of our biblical hermeneutic, it is not clear that homosexual practices are not being condemned in and of themselves. The reason that homosexual relations are even mentioned is that they are an example of practices that have drawn the focus of people away from God. They are a sin in that they indicate that people do not love God with all their heart because they have resorted to practices that divert their attention from loving him.

Romans 1:24–27

> *Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (NIV).*

The primary biblical text cited in the discussion of homosexuality is Romans 1:26–27. But even in this verse, homosexuality is not the primary sin that is being discussed; idolatry is.[37] The reason that Paul names homosexuality in his discussion is because it is a symptom of the problem that his audience could relate to, not because homosexuality was the problem itself.[38] In this passage, Paul does not use any of his vocabulary for sin in relation to homosexuality but only in respect to idolatry.

In verse 24, Paul begins his discussion by an admonition that God has surrendered this audience to the desires of their heart to degrade their bodies. As Countryman points out the Greek word for desire, *epithumia*, does not always have a negative connotation and Paul does not use this word to condemn the Gentiles for these desires of the heart but accepts this as a difference between Jews and Gentiles. Paul does not question that Gentiles would be considered unclean if evaluated by the Jewish purity code but as demonstrated in earlier discussion, the purity code does not apply to Gentiles and is not a necessary requirement for the Christian faith.

The error that Paul is discussing in these verses is idolatry and the penalty for this sin is uncleanliness, which is not sin so much as the manifestation of the sin. For Paul, homosexuality is a sign of idolatrous faith, as he believes that homosexual acts are a choice of heterosexuals to partake in sexual acts that are contrary to their natural inclination.[39] It is clear that in this way Paul condemns the sin he is discussing. But while the assumption is often made that this sin is homosexuality, in fact idolatry is the sin Paul rebukes. God's wrath is brought because of idolatry and homosexuality is just a sign that Gentiles have become distorted in their lives because they have distorted their view of God.[40] Homosexuality is a sin of ritual impurity and of the Gentiles' status as outside the Jewish community. But Paul will go on to say the Jewish (purity) Law will not itself save Jews and both Jews and impure Gentiles are in need of God's grace.[41]

Homosexuality is discussed as a way to demonstrate the brokenness of life away from God.[42] This would have been familiar to Paul's audience of Jews and Gentiles because of the homosexual acts that took place in the temples to pagan gods. Idolatry is the fundamental sin against God because it denies one's love for him.[43] In idolatry, God is not the focus of your life and this is in direct violation of the theme that runs throughout the Bible.

Paul's idea that homosexuality was wrong because of its link with idolatrous faith is concurrent with his contemporaries. Seneca, Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom, Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish writing Wisdom of Solomon, and Stoic philosophy all are in agreement with Paul about homosexual practices as evidence of idolatry.[44] The reason that there is so much commonality between the writers of Paul's time is that there was only one understanding of homosexual relations. As discussed in the previous section, the only conception of homosexuality at the time of Paul's writings was drawn from the understanding of pagan homosexual practices, which were sexual relationships driven by lust and fueled by idolatrous belief.[45] In fact, as in the verses found in First Corinthians and First Timothy, the vocabulary of sin is not here applied to homosexual acts.[46] Paul and his contemporaries had no idea that a homosexual relationship that was based on love could exist, it was never even considered as a reality.

When this passage is looked at in the context it is written, both historically and textually, it is evident that Paul speaks of homosexuality not as a sin per se but as a consequence of the real sin, idolatry. This interpretation is in line with the biblical hermeneutic that we have used to evaluate all the other texts on homosexuality. The sin of idolatry is of paramount importance because it violates the biblical hermeneutic that we have extrapolated from Matthew 22:37. By definition when involved in idolatrous faith, God is not the focus of your whole heart. Homosexual activity (to which Paul refers here) is merely one of the manifestations or consequences of the sin of idolatry.

III. Biblical Guidelines

Homosexuality *per se* is never explicitly condemned anywhere in the biblical text except as a violation of the Hebrew Testament purity codes; it is always addressed in connection within a greater context. This is the reason why it is difficult to establish a clear-cut position of what the Bible says about homosexuality. Many form their beliefs about what the Bible says concerning homosexuality by reading these six verses and listening to the rhetoric of Christian organizations and media outlets without considering their context. This is a faulty way to develop any opinion because it leans too heavily on conjecture, uninformed interpretation, and cultural biases.

In consideration of the biblical text as a whole, the most important aspect is to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Because God loves all people, your love in return will show your commitment to God. This is the principle that must be applied in the evaluation of the Scriptures to develop a correct understanding of their meaning. Loving and faithful relations are the type of relationships that God wants for his people here on Earth because these type relationships

parallel what we have with God.

L. William Countryman lays out an explanation for why many have misread the New Testament verses that address homosexuality. He proposes that these verses appeal to the purity code that was established in Leviticus to guide the Israelite community and that this code is not necessary for the Christian faith.[47] For Paul, homosexuality was an example of impurity that was present in the Gentile community but this had no bearing on their desire to become Christians. Homosexuality is used as an example of the purity system rather than food for instance as it must have been divisive between the Gentile and Jewish communities but not within the Jewish community.[48] As Jesus had already thrown out the purity code as a necessity for the Christian faith, Paul is reinforcing this notion in his letters to the church communities.[49]

When the Scriptures about homosexuality are looked at as part of a greater whole, homosexuals are not exceptions from God's love because of their sexual orientation. As previously mentioned, Jesus does not address homosexuality either directly or indirectly within the Gospels. Moreover, the modern day concept of homosexuality was not in view when the biblical texts were written; loving and committed homosexual relationships do not seem to be addressed and therefore we cannot impose a contemporary concept on this historical text. This would be analogous to looking for guidance on how to map out an aeronautical course in 16th century nautical charts; the concept just does not exist.

The issue now concerns the application of these findings for the relationships of homosexuals in the contemporary Christian community. Jeffrey Siker suggests looking back to the parable of the wheat and the tares found in Matthew 13:24–30 as a model.[50] In this parable, Jesus tells his disciples about the householder whose enemy sowed weeds among the wheat that he planted. When his slaves asked him if he wanted them to pull the weeds, he told them not to as they would also uproot the wheat he had planted. He would direct his reapers to collect the weeds at harvest time before they collected his wheat. What this parable suggests is patience and toleration of those whom we see as weeds in our field of wheat because if we try to discern and uproot the weeds amongst us, we will also dig up wheat as well.[51] At the harvest time, God and his reapers (angels) will differentiate the weeds from the wheat and will deal with each accordingly. This parable is enlightening for the Christian community of today as it instructs us not to make judgments and condemnations of others especially when the basis for judgment is so unclear because only God has the ability to pull out the weeds without taking some wheat with them.

Through my analysis of the six biblical texts that deal with homosexuality, I now understand what guidance the Bible gives on homosexuality. I came into this biblical analysis looking for answers from the Scriptures on homosexuality and what I have found is not what the whole of society believes the text says. In applying a biblical hermeneutic that was developed from within the text, I was able to glean off many of the contextual barriers that prevent many from discerning the actual meaning of the Scriptures. In my examination, I feel as though I have been able to come to a conclusion that is not based on my presuppositions of the text but rather a conclusion that fits with the theme of the entire Bible. Where there is love and loving relationships that sharpen our focus on God rather than dulling

it, there is agreement with the biblical theme. While many who look for answers to homosexuality get bogged down in the contextual details, I have been able to recognize these outliers and pass over them in finding the real message of the Bible.

Beyond its condemnation in the purity code, it is not clear that the Bible focuses on homosexuality as a sin per se. It can become sinful if it leads us to idolatry and takes our focus away from loving God with our entire heart, soul, and mind, just as heterosexuality can also become idolatrous. In terms of their impact on our faith, the dangers inherent in homosexual relationships are the same as those in heterosexual relationships. Most importantly, it is our relationship with God that is our main focus and all relationships that are of this world are understood accordingly; whether homosexual or heterosexual, they need to enhance this primary relationship with God. If the relationship is not fulfilling this task, then a change needs to be made. Sin is not defined by the type of relationship we have but rather by where the relationship puts us in relation to God; if it brings us closer it is a right relationship; if our focus is drawn away from God as a by-product, the relationship is idolatrous.

By using a biblical hermeneutic that is derived from the central meaning of Scripture, a clear evaluation of what the text actually says can be made. Without this objectivity provided by biblical hermeneutic, the text can be shaped to support virtually any position through proof-texting and legitimate unloving and invalid judgments. This is why the establishment of a biblical hermeneutic developed from and grounded in Scripture is indispensable.

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